

Bonneville Power Administration

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BPA land purchase along the John Day Middle Fork

targets major benefits for salmon and steelhead

PORTLAND, Ore. - Some of the best spring chinook spawning gravel in Oregon will soon provide protected habitat for even more fish. That gravel, home to 40 percent of the chinook spawning in the Middle Fork of the John Day River, is part of the 4,295-acre Forrest Ranch that the Bonneville Power Administration has purchased for \$3.9 million on behalf of the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation.

BPA purchased the Forrest Ranch as part of its effort to recover fish and wildlife affected by the construction of the Federal Columbia River Power System. This high priority conservation and recovery project can be implemented to provide immediate and measurable benefits to anadromous fish that have been listed under the Endangered Species Act as threatened or endangered. It helps satisfy the agency's Endangered Species Act obligations and furthers the Northwest Power Planning Council's fish and wildlife program.

Summer steelhead and bull trout, both listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, will benefit from the purchase through restoration of valuable rearing habitat. The tribes will enhance existing critical rearing areas for juvenile fish on 4.4 miles of the Middle Fork and 1.7 miles of the mainstem John Day River and their tributaries on the ranch under a new management plan. Meanwhile, the upland and riparian areas of the ranch will provide good habitat for birds, deer, elk and other animals.

The significance of this purchase cannot be overstated, said Bobby Brunoe, general manager of the Warm Springs Tribes' Natural Resource Department. The John Day is a unique river because it has no major dams and is home to wild, not hatchery, salmon and steelhead. This stretch of the Middle Fork is among the most productive parts of the entire John Day Basin.

The tribes intend to manage this land so that the spawning and rearing areas become even more productive as the river banks and riparian areas are restored from the historic effects of land clearing, channelization and grazing, Brunoe said.

The Forrest Ranch is an example of a project selected because of its scientific merit. Biologists long ago identified these areas of the John Day Basin as critical to the protection of spawning habitat and the recovery of salmon and steelhead, said Steve Wright, administrator of the Bonneville Power Administration.

The tribes showed remarkable leadership and dedication in making this purchase possible, Wright stated. It has taken a lot of hard work over a lot of years to negotiate this purchase. All involved should be proud of their effort.

This is an excellent project. It was approved by the Power Planning

Council's Independent Scientific Review Panel, and we were pleased to recommend it to Bonneville for funding, said John Brogoitti of Pendleton, chairman of the council's Fish and Wildlife Committee.

Under an innovative management plan, the tribes propose to manage the land for the benefit of fish and wildlife while still grazing cattle in the area. For over a year prior to gaining title to the land on July 2, the tribes had been leasing the ranch and experimenting with ways to conserve critical habitat while continuing to raise cattle.

We are working to demonstrate to the local community and the region that managing for productive habitat conditions while accommodating agricultural use is a viable conservation strategy, said Shaun Robertson, coordinator of the tribes' John Day Basin Office. If this approach is successful, we may generate a broader interest in conservation options on private lands, effectively spreading our initial investment across a larger landscape and preserving additional critical habitat areas.

Currently, revenue from ranch operations helps pay for improvements to the land and allows the ranch to stay on the county tax rolls with the same agricultural status it had prior to the sale.

Many biologists see the John Day Basin as a test of nature's ability to rebound on its own. Populations of wild spring chinook had plummeted so low by the 1950s that there were no redds (nests of eggs) in the waters that flow through the Middle Fork portion of the ranch. Largely due to the efforts of conservation groups, agencies and private landowners, recent chinook returns have averaged around 15 redds per mile, without any hatchery supplementation. The expectation is that this number will exceed 20 redds per mile in the most productive habitat in the near future through more focused land management.

The John Day Basin is truly a bright spot in the regional salmon picture, stated Robertson. It's clearly an example of what can be achieved with a long-term grass-roots conservation program.

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